

APRIL 20, 1972

Way back last year, my sister began to want to leave New York City to move back to the ranch country. Ranch bred people follow that pattern. Once people learn that having their ribs punched by elbows day in and day out isn't so glorious, they develop strong urges to return to the land.

Her fever peaked last week. She called the ranch, insisting that I come see an outfit she'd found in the upper reaches of New Mexico.

To get to that part of New Mexico from the Shortgrass Country, you have to cross the largest farming area in the state of Texas. From one end of the farms to the other must be 300 miles. I know it's close to that, because on the first three hours of the trip I saw nearly that many miles of parked cotton trailers.

Mirages and grain elevators are used to break the scenery. Farm implements are surveyed by the acre. I don't know how the petroleum industry supplies enough grease for their tractors, much less the amount it must take for all those whatcha-maycall-its that are pulled around behind the tractors.

The country is obviously a prosperous one. Big brick houses grace every plot of land. Without asking any questions, you can tell that the tractor-jockeying business is superior to sheep and cow herding. Poets who used to blubber on the subject of the weary plowman would sure fall short of copy in those parts. If that bunch is weary from anything, it's from filing deposit slips.

From the looks of the land, it'd also be a good place to stake mining claims. Around tax time, I'd imagine 'that it'd be tempting to bury a wad of money in the soft ground.

Hunting buried treasure on the plains wouldn't be like hunting buried treasure at home. You could uproot the entire Shortgrass Country without finding anything more valuable than maybe a set of grandma's shoe buttons or a tobacco sack full of arrowheads. I bet those farmers have plenty of coin hidden under their back steps. The government is all heated up to catch the middleman in price rise; I wonder why they haven't checked those boys.

The ranch that my sister had found was close to the Colorado line. She'd 'learned to ski up north, so she had been looking for an outfit close to a ski resort.

We hadn't been together 25 minutes until she'd lost her temper. All I did was ask her why she didn't buy a ski resort and hope that later on a rancher would get tired of seeing tourists falling off the slopes and sell her a ranch at a big discount.

Then she said she wouldn't have had me come up there if she had remembered what a smart Alec I was. I told her that I might be a smart Alec, but I wasn't the kind that'd strap on a pair of waxed boards in freezing weather when there was a fireplace and sofa close by.

The realtor showing the ranch began to look as sad as if he'd just heard the Federal Land Bank had closed. Real estate birds aren't overly fond of outside advisors, especially the kind who are apt to blurt out that ranching can be 10 times more perilous than skiing off Mt. Everest on a surfboard. All they want around is someone who will do a lot of oh-ing and ah-ing every time a piece of greasewood is silhouetted by a puff of dust. Practicing ranchers, needless to say, aren't ever welcome on that sort of deal. To be

partially honest, I can't think offhand where a rancher is real welcome when oh-ing and ah-ing are apt to cause several hundred thousand to change hands. The last I heard, the deal was pending. I didn't get a chance to tell the real estate salesman goodbye. I wanted to ask him what he thought it'd cost to put in a farm or a ski resort in the Shortgrass Country. But he left town in a big rush, or that's what the lady, at the motel said.